

FERAL CITIES

Richard J. Norton

Imagine a great metropolis covering hundreds of square miles. Once a vital component in a national economy, this sprawling urban environment is now a vast collection of blighted buildings, an immense petri dish of both ancient and new diseases, a territory where the rule of law has long been replaced by near anarchy in which the only security available is that which is attained through brute power.¹ Such cities have been routinely imagined in apocalyptic movies and in certain science-fiction genres, where they are often portrayed as gigantic versions of T. S. Eliot's *Rat's Alley*.² Yet *this* city would still be globally connected. It would possess at least a modicum of commercial linkages, and some of its inhabitants would have access to the world's most modern communication and computing technologies. It would, in effect, be a feral city.

Admittedly, the very term "feral city" is both provocative and controversial. Yet this description has been chosen advisedly. The feral city may be a phenomenon that never takes place, yet its emergence should not be dismissed as impossible. The phrase also suggests, at least faintly, the nature of what may become one of the more difficult security challenges of the new century.

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Over the past decade or so a great deal of scholarly attention has been paid to the phenomenon of failing states.³ Nor has this pursuit been undertaken solely by the academic community. Government leaders and military commanders as well as directors of nongovernmental organizations and intergovernmental bodies have attempted to deal with faltering, failing, and failed states. Involvement by the United

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States in such matters has run the gamut from expressions of concern to cautious humanitarian assistance to full-fledged military intervention. In contrast, however, there has been a significant lack of concern for the potential emergence of failed cities. This is somewhat surprising, as the feral city may prove as common a feature of the global landscape of the first decade of the twenty-first century as the faltering, failing, or failed state was in the last decade of the twentieth. While it may be premature to suggest that a truly feral city—with the possible exception of Mogadishu—can be found anywhere on the globe today, indicators point to a day, not so distant, when such examples will be easily found.

This article first seeks to define a feral city. It then describes such a city's attributes and suggests why the issue is worth international attention. A possible methodology to identify cities that have the potential to become feral will then be presented. Finally, the potential impact of feral cities on the U.S. military, and the U.S. Navy specifically, will be discussed.

DEFINITION AND ATTRIBUTES

The putative “feral city” is (or would be) a metropolis with a population of more than a million people in a state the government of which has lost the ability to maintain the rule of law within the city's boundaries yet remains a functioning actor in the greater international system.⁴

In a feral city social services are all but nonexistent, and the vast majority of the city's occupants have no access to even the most basic health or security assistance. There is no social safety net. Human security is for the most part a matter of individual initiative. Yet a feral city does not descend into complete, random chaos. Some elements, be they criminals, armed resistance groups, clans, tribes, or neighborhood associations, exert various degrees of control over portions of the city. Intercity, city-state, and even international commercial transactions occur, but corruption, avarice, and violence are their hallmarks. A feral city experiences massive levels of disease and creates enough pollution to qualify as an international environmental disaster zone. Most feral cities would suffer from massive urban hypertrophy, covering vast expanses of land. The city's structures range from once-great buildings symbolic of state power to the meanest shantytowns and slums. Yet even under these conditions, these cities continue to grow, and the majority of occupants do not voluntarily leave.⁵

Feral cities would exert an almost magnetic influence on terrorist organizations. Such megalopolises will provide exceptionally safe havens for armed resistance groups, especially those having cultural affinity with at least one sizable segment of the city's population. The efficacy and portability of the most modern computing and communication systems allow the activities of a worldwide

terrorist, criminal, or predatory and corrupt commercial network to be coordinated and directed with equipment easily obtained on the open market and packed into a minivan. The vast size of a feral city, with its buildings, other structures, and subterranean spaces, would offer nearly perfect protection from overhead sensors, whether satellites or unmanned aerial vehicles. The city's population represents for such entities a ready source of recruits and a built-in intelligence network. Collecting human intelligence against them in this environment is likely to be a daunting task. Should the city contain airport or seaport facilities, such an organization would be able to import and export a variety of items. The feral city environment will actually make it easier for an armed resistance group that does not already have connections with criminal organizations to make them. The linkage between such groups, once thought to be rather unlikely, is now so commonplace as to elicit no comment.

WHAT'S NEW?

But is not much of this true of certain troubled urban areas of today and of the past? It is certainly true that cities have long bred diseases. Criminal gangs have often held sway over vast stretches of urban landscape and slums; "projects" and shantytowns have long been part of the cityscape. Nor is urban pollution anything new—London was environmentally toxic in the 1960s. So what is different about "feral cities"?

The most notable difference is that where the police forces of the state have sometimes *opted* not to enforce the rule of law in certain urban localities, in a feral city these forces will not be *able* to do so. Should the feral city be of special importance—for example, a major seaport or airport—the state might find it easier to negotiate power and profit-sharing arrangements with city power centers to ensure that facilities important to state survival continue to operate. For a weak state government, the ability of the feral city to resist the police forces of the state may make such negotiations the only option. In some countries, especially those facing massive development challenges, even the military would be unequal to imposing legal order on a feral city. In other, more developed states it might be possible to use military force to subdue a feral city, but the cost would be extremely high, and the operation would be more likely to leave behind a field of rubble than a reclaimed and functioning population center.

Other forms of state control and influence in a feral city would also be weak, and to an unparalleled degree. In a feral city, the state's writ does not run. In fact, state and international authorities would be massively ignorant of the true nature of the power structures, population, and activities within a feral city.

Yet another difference will be the level and nature of the security threat posed by a feral city. Traditionally, problems of urban decay and associated issues, such as crime, have been seen as domestic issues best dealt with by internal security or police forces. That will no longer be an option.

REASONS FOR CONCERN

Indeed, the majority of threats posed by a feral city would be viewed as both nontraditional and transnational by most people currently involved with national security. Chief among the nontraditional threats are the potential for pandemics and massive environmental degradation, and the near certainty that feral cities will serve as major transshipment points for all manner of illicit commodities.

As has been noted, city-born pandemics are not new. Yet the toxic environment of a feral city potentially poses uniquely severe threats. A new illness or a strain of an existing disease could easily breed and mutate without detection in a feral city. Since feral cities would not be hermetically sealed, it is quite easy to envision a deadly and dangerously virulent epidemic originating from such places. As of this writing, the SARS outbreak of 2003 seems to offer an example of a city (Guangdong, China) serving as a pathogen incubator and point of origin of an intercontinental epidemic.⁶ In the case of SARS, the existence of the disease was rapidly identified, the origin was speedily traced, and a medical offensive was quickly mounted. Had such a disease originated in a feral city, it is likely that this process would have been much more complicated and taken a great deal more time. As it is, numerous diseases that had been believed under control have recently mutated into much more drug-resistant and virulent forms.

Globally, large cities are already placing significant environmental stress on their local and regional environments, and nowhere are these problems more pronounced than in coastal metropolises. A feral city—with minimal or no sanitation facilities, a complete absence of environmental controls, and a massive population—would be in effect a toxic-waste dump, poisoning coastal waters, watersheds, and river systems throughout their hinterlands.⁷

Major cities containing ports or airfields are already trying to contend with black-market activity that ranges from evading legal fees, dues, or taxes to trafficking in illegal and banned materials. Black marketeers in a feral city would have *carte blanche* to ship or receive such materials to or from a global audience.⁸

As serious as these transnational issues are, another threat is potentially far more dangerous. The anarchic allure of the feral city for criminal and terrorist groups has already been discussed. The combination of large profits from criminal activity and the increasing availability of all families of weapons might make it possible for relatively small groups to acquire weapons of mass destruction. A

terrorist group in a feral city with access to world markets, especially if it can directly ship material by air or sea, might launch an all but untraceable attack from its urban haven.

GOING FERAL

Throughout history, major cities have endured massive challenges without “going feral.” How could it be determined that a city is at risk of becoming feral? What indicators might give warning? Is a warning system possible?

The answer is yes. This article offers just such a model, a taxonomy consisting of twelve sets of measurements, grouped into four main categories.⁹ In it, measurements representing a healthy city are “green,” those that would suggest cause for concern are “yellow,” and those that indicate danger, a potentially feral condition, “red.” In the table below, the upper blocks in each category (column) represent positive or healthy conditions, those at the bottom unhealthy ones.

THE HEALTH OF CITIES

	Government	Economy	Services	Security
Healthy (“Green”)	Enacts effective legislation, directs resources, controls events in all portions of the city all the time. Not corrupt.	Robust. Significant foreign investment. Provides goods and services. Possesses stable and adequate tax base.	Complete range of services, including educational and cultural, available to all city residents.	Well regulated by professional, ethical police forces. Quick response to wide spectrum of requirements.
Marginal (“Yellow”)	Exercises only “patchwork” or “diurnal” control. Highly corrupt.	Limited/no foreign investment. Subsidized or decaying industries and growing deficits.	Can manage minimal level of public health, hospital access, potable water, trash disposal.	Little regard for legality/human rights. Police often matched/stymied by criminal “peers.”
Going Feral (“Red”)	At best has negotiated zones of control; at worst does not exist.	Either local subsistence industries or industry based on illegal commerce.	Intermittent to non-existent power and water. Those who can afford to will privately contract.	Nonexistent. Security is attained through private means or paying protection.

The first category assesses the ability of the state to govern the city. A city “in the green” has a healthy, stable government—though not necessarily a democratically elected one. A democratic city leadership is perhaps the most desirable, but some cities governed by authoritarian regimes could be at extremely low risk of becoming feral. City governments “in the green” would be able to enact effective legislation, direct resources, and control events in all parts of the city at all times.¹⁰ A yellow indication would indicate that city government enjoyed such authority only in portions of the city, producing what might be called “patchwork” governance, or that it exerted authority only during the day—“diurnal” governance. State authorities would be unable to govern a “red” city at all, or would govern in name only.¹¹ An entity within the city claiming to be an

official representative of the state would simply be another actor competing for resources and power.

The second category involves the city's economy. Cities "in the green" would enjoy a productive mix of foreign investment, service and manufacturing activities, and a robust tax base. Cities afforded a "yellow" rating would have ceased to attract substantial foreign investment, be marked by decaying or heavily subsidized industrial facilities, and suffer from ever-growing deficits. Cities "in the red" would have no governmental tax base. Any industrial activity within their boundaries would be limited to subsistence-level manufacturing and trade or to illegal trafficking—in smuggled materials, weapons, drugs, and so on.

The third category is focused on city services. Cities with a "green" rating would not only have a complete array of essential services but would provide public education and cultural facilities to their populations. These services would be available to all sectors without distinction or bias. Cities with a yellow rating would be lacking in providing education and cultural opportunities but would be able to maintain minimal levels of public health and sanitation. Trash pickup, ambulance service, and access to hospitals would all exist. Such a city's water supply would pass minimum safety standards. In contrast, cities in the "red" zone would be unable to supply more than intermittent power and water, some not even that.

Security is the subject of the fourth category. "Green" cities, while obviously not crime free, would be well regulated by professional, ethical police forces, able to respond quickly to a wide spectrum of threats. "Yellow" cities would be marked by extremely high crime rates, disregard of whole families of "minor crimes" due to lack of police resources, and criminal elements capable of serious confrontations. A "yellow" city's police force would have little regard for individual rights or legal constraints. In a "red" city, the police force has failed altogether or has become merely another armed group seeking power and wealth. Citizens must provide for their own protection, perhaps by hiring independent security personnel or paying protection to criminal organizations.

A special, overarching consideration is corruption. Cities "in the green" are relatively corruption free. Scandals are rare enough to be newsworthy, and when corruption is uncovered, self-policing mechanisms effectively deal with it. Corruption in cities "in the yellow" would be much worse, extending to every level of the city administration. In yellow cities, "patchwork" patterns might reflect which portions of the city were able to buy security and services and which were not. As for "red" cities, it would be less useful to speak of government corruption than of criminal and individual opportunism, which would be unconstrained.

CITY “MOSAICS”

The picture of a city that emerges is a mosaic, and like an artist’s mosaic it can be expected to contain more than one color. Some healthy cities function with remarkable degrees of corruption. Others, robust and vital in many ways, suffer from appalling levels of criminal activity. Even a city with multiple “red” categories is not necessarily feral—yet. It is the overall pattern and whether that pattern is improving or deteriorating over time that give the overall diagnosis.

It is important to remember a diagnostic tool such as this merely produces a “snapshot” and is therefore of limited utility unless supported by trend analysis. “Patchwork” and “diurnal” situations can exist in all the categories; an urban center with an overall red rating—that is, a feral city—might boast a tiny enclave where “green” conditions prevail; quite healthy cities experience cycles of decline and improvement. Another caution concerns the categories themselves. Although useful indicators of a city’s health, the boundaries are not clearly defined but can be expected to blur.

The Healthy City: New York. To some it would seem that New York is an odd example of a “green” city. One hears and recalls stories of corruption, police brutality, crime, pollution, neighborhoods that resemble war zones, and the like. Yet by objective indicators (and certainly in the opinion of the majority of its citizens) New York is a healthy city and in no risk of “going feral.” Its police force is well regulated, well educated, and responsive. The city is a hub of national and international investment. It generates substantial revenues and has a stable tax base. It provides a remarkable scope of services, including a wide range of educational and cultural opportunities. Does this favorable evaluation mean that the rich are not treated differently from the poor, that services and infrastructure are uniformly well maintained, or that there are no disparities of economic opportunity or race? Absolutely not. Yet despite such problems New York remains a viable municipality.

The Yellow Zone: Mexico City. This sprawling megalopolis of more than twenty million continues to increase in size and population every year. It is one of the largest urban concentrations in the world. As the seat of the Mexican government, it receives a great deal of state attention. However, Mexico City is now described as an urban nightmare.¹²

Mexico City’s air is so polluted that it is routinely rated medically as unfit to breathe. There are square miles of slums, often without sewage or running water. Law and order is breaking down at an accelerating rate. Serious crime has doubled over the past three to four years; it is estimated that 15.5 million assaults now occur every year in Mexico City. Car-jacking and taxi-jacking have reached such epidemic proportions that visitors are now officially warned not to use the cabs. The Mexico City police department has ninety-one thousand officers—

more men than the Canadian army—but graft and corruption on the force are rampant and on the rise. According to Mexican senator Adolfo Zinser, police officers themselves directly contribute to the city’s crime statistics: “In the morning they are a policeman. In the afternoon they’re crooks.” The city’s judicial system is equally corrupt. Not surprisingly, these aspects of life in Mexico City have reduced the willingness of foreign investors to send money or representatives there.¹³

Johannesburg: On a Knife Edge. As in many South African cities, police in Johannesburg are waging a desperate war for control of their city, and it is not clear whether they will win. Though relatively small in size, with only 2.9 million official residents, Johannesburg nevertheless experiences more than five thousand murders a year and at least twice as many rapes. Over the last several years investors and major industry have fled the city. Many of the major buildings of the Central Business District have been abandoned and are now home to squatters. The South African National Stock Exchange has been removed to Sandton—a safer northern suburb. Police forces admit they do not control large areas of the city; official advisories warn against driving on certain thoroughfares. At night residents are advised to remain in their homes. Tourism has dried up, and conventions, once an important source of revenue, are now hosted elsewhere in the country.

The city also suffers from high rates of air pollution, primarily from vehicle exhaust but also from the use of open fires and coal for cooking and heating. Johannesburg’s two rivers are also considered unsafe, primarily because of untreated human waste and chemicals leaching from piles of mining dross. Mining has also contaminated much of the soil in the vicinity.

Like those of many states and cities in Africa, Johannesburg’s problems are exacerbated by the AIDS epidemic. Nationally it is feared the number of infected persons may reach as high as 20 percent of the population. All sectors of the economy have been affected adversely by the epidemic, including in Johannesburg.¹⁴

Although Mexico City and Johannesburg clearly qualify for “yellow” and “red” status, respectively, it would be premature to predict that either of these urban centers will inevitably become feral. Police corruption has been an aspect of Mexico City life for decades; further, the recent transition from one political party to two and a downswing in the state economy may be having a temporarily adverse influence on the city. In the case of Johannesburg, the South African government has most definitely not given up on attempts to revive what was once an industrial and economic showplace. In both Mexico and South Africa there are dedicated men and women who are determined to eliminate corruption, clean the environment, and better the lives of the people. Yet a note of caution is appropriate, for in neither example is the trend in a positive direction.

Further—and it should come as no surprise—massive cities in the developing world are at far greater risk of becoming feral than those in more developed states. Not only are support networks in such regions much less robust, but as a potentially feral city grows, it consumes progressively more resources.¹⁵ Efforts to meet its growing needs often no more than maintain the status quo or, more often, merely slow the rate of decay of government control and essential services. All this in turn reduces the resources that can be applied to other portions of the country, and it may well increase the speed of urban hypertrophy. However, even such developed states as Brazil face the threat of feral cities. For example, in March 2003 criminal cartels controlled much of Rio de Janeiro. Rio police would not enter these areas, and in effect pursued toward them a policy of containment.¹⁶

FERAL CITIES AND THE U.S. MILITARY

Feral cities do not represent merely a sociological or urban-planning issue; they present unique military challenges. Their very size and densely built-up character make them natural havens for a variety of hostile nonstate actors, ranging from small cells of terrorists to large paramilitary forces and militias. History indicates that should such a group take American hostages, successful rescue is not likely.¹⁷ Combat operations in such environments tend to be manpower intensive; limiting noncombatant casualties can be extraordinarily difficult. An enemy more resolute than that faced in the 2003 war with Iraq could inflict substantial casualties on an attacking force. The defense of the Warsaw ghetto in World War II suggests how effectively a conventional military assault can be resisted in this environment. Also, in a combat operation in a feral city the number of casualties from pollutants, toxins, and disease may well be higher than those caused by the enemy.

These environmental risks could also affect ships operating near a feral city. Its miles-long waterfront may offer as protected and sheltered a setting for antishipping weapons as any formal coastal defense site. Furthermore, many port cities that today, with proper security procedures, would be visited for fuel and other supplies will, if they become feral, no longer be available. This would hamper diplomatic efforts, reduce the U.S. Navy's ability to show the flag, and complicate logistics and supply for forward-deployed forces.

Feral cities, as and if they emerge, will be something new on the international landscape. Cities have descended into savagery in the past, usually as a result of war or civil conflict, and armed resistance groups have operated out of urban centers before. But feral cities, as such, will be a new phenomenon and will pose security threats on a scale hitherto not encountered.¹⁸ It is questionable whether the tools, resources, and strategies that would be required to deal with these threats exist at present. But given the indications of the imminent emergence of feral cities, it is time to begin creating the means.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to my colleague Dr. James Miskel for the “petri dish” analogy.
2. Thomas Stern Eliot, “The Wasteland,” in *The New Oxford Book of English Verses: 1250–1950*, ed. Helen Gardner (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 881.
3. See, for example, James F. Miskel and Richard J. Norton, “Spotting Trouble: Identifying Faltering and Failing States,” *Naval War College Review* 50, no. 2 (Spring 1997), pp. 79–91.
4. Perhaps the most arbitrary component of this definition is the selection of a million inhabitants as a defining characteristic of a feral city. An earlier approach to this issue focused on *megacities*, cities with more than ten million inhabitants. However, subsequent research indicated that much smaller cities could also become feral, and so the population threshold was reduced. For more information on concepts of urbanization see Stanley D. Brunn, Jack F. Williams, and Donald J. Zeigler, *Cities of the World: World Regional Urban Development* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), pp. 5–14.
5. Such a pattern is already visible today. See Brunn, Williams, and Zeigler, chap. 1.
6. “China Criticized for Dragging Feet on Outbreak,” *News in Science*, 7 April 2003, p. 1.
7. The issue of pollution stemming from coastal cities is well documented. For example, see chapter two of *United Nations Environmental Program, Global Environmental Outlook—2000* (London: Earthscan, 2001).
8. The profits involved in such enterprises can be staggering. For example, the profits from smuggled cigarettes in 1997 were estimated to be as high as sixteen billion dollars a year. Among the identified major smuggling centers were Naples, Italy; Hong Kong; and Bogota, Colombia. Raymond Bonner and Christopher Drew, “Cigarette Makers Are Seen as Aiding Rise in Smuggling,” *New York Times*, 26 August 1997, C1.
9. A similar approach was used in Miskel and Norton, cited above, for developing a taxonomy for identifying failing states.
10. This is not to imply that such a city would be 100 percent law-abiding or that incidents of government failure could not be found. But these conditions would be the exception and not the rule.
11. Not that this would present no complications. It is likely that states containing a feral city would not acknowledge a loss of sovereignty over the metropolis, even if this were patently the case. Such claims could pose a significant obstacle to collective international action.
12. Transcript, PBS Newshour, “Taming Mexico City,” 12 January 1999, available at www.Pbs.org/newshour/bb/latin_American/jan-jun99/mexico [accessed 15 June 2003].
13. Compiled from a variety of sources, most notably “Taming Mexico City,” *News Hour with Jim Lehrer*, transcript, 12 January 1999.
14. Compiled from a variety of sources, including BBC reports.
15. Brunn, Williams, and Zeigler, p. 37.
16. Interview, Dr. Peter Liotta, with the author, Newport, R.I., 14 April 2003.
17. While the recent successful rescue of Army Private First Class Jessica Lynch during the 2003 Iraq War demonstrates that success in such operations is not impossible, U.S. experiences with hostages in Iran, Lebanon, and Somalia would suggest failure is a more likely outcome.
18. It is predicted that 60 percent of the world’s population will live in an urban environment by the year 2030, as opposed to 47 percent in 2000. Furthermore, the majority of this growth will occur in less developed countries, especially in coastal South Asia. More than fifty-eight cities will boast populations of more than five million people. Brunn, Williams, and Zeigler, pp. 9–11.